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AUTHOR Gonor, Michele
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ABSTRACT

This paper documents one university's use of action research to encourage preservice teachers' ongoing critical reflection as they negotiated diversity and community in their classrooms. Several supervisors developed a self-study research plan, meeting over 1 year to study several strategies for engaging preservice teachers in critical reflection. Preservice teachers were required to participate in a community project that was a natural extension of student teaching. Data were collected from meeting notes, journal entries, sharing sessions, interviews, supervisory journal entries, feedback cards from peers, and final reports. Researchers analyzed the impact of action research participation on student teachers' critically reflective practice and understanding of external communities. As participants examined more closely their students and classrooms, they began critically viewing their situations and dealing constructively with their concerns, considering them as possible action research topics. Student teachers discussed their action research questions and strategies in class, then designed their investigations, which examined the effects of particular teaching practices on certain students. In weekly seminars, they shared their strategies and challenges. As students changed classroom placements each semester, their action research changed focus. Students came to a greater understanding of their classroom community by participating in the project. They learned to view teaching itself as a form of inquiry or experimentation. (Contains 52 references.) (SM)

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Using Community Based Action Research to Promote Critical Reflection in Preservice Teachers

Michèle Genor
University of Wisconsin-Madison

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A Guide to this Study

This paper will document my attempts as a university supervisor to utilize the practice of action research with preservice teachers to encourage on-going critical reflection as they negotiate the complex concepts of diversity and community in their classroom settings. This discussion will illustrate the positive effects that action research can have on the professional development of novice teachers and describe some challenges of incorporating this strategy into a preservice preparation program.

An integral piece to this study is my own participation in an action research investigation with two fellow supervisors. Realizing the value of working collaboratively to address our common concerns and to offer one another support in our work as supervisors, we each developed a self-study research plan. Meeting on a bi-monthly basis for one year, we studied three different strategies to engage preservice teachers in critical reflection. In this collaborative self-study, I examined my role as the facilitator of preservice teachers' action research investigations and my participation in this process of critical inquiry.

Informing the Study

Philosophical Context

The University of Wisconsin-Madison Elementary Education Program emphasizes the social reconstructionist tradition which foregrounds the relationship between the social conditions of schooling and practices that take place in classrooms (Liston & Zeichner, 1991). In support of this tradition, preservice teachers are encouraged to think about, and be prepared for the complex issues they will encounter as classroom teachers. At its core, a social reconstructionist orientation towards teaching "emphasizes the ability of teachers to examine the social and political implications of their practice and the contexts in which they work for their contribution to greater equity and justice in schooling and society. It entails a deliberate commitment by teacher

educators to work for social change" (Zeichner, 1994, p. 30). It is absolutely necessary for beginning teachers to adopt what Frykholm describes as a "critical consciousness, if they are to become educators who are willing and able to address the growing inequities in our schools and wider society" (1997, p. 57). As a first step in developing these reflective abilities, preservice teachers need to be supported as they examine their practices in the context of their practical field experiences.

One of the goals of the UW-Madison teacher education program is to prepare preservice teachers to develop the "attitudes, knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to work effectively with a diverse student population" (Zeichner, 1996, p. 133). This means that preservice teachers need to understand the multiple dimensions of their own classroom community and the impact or relationship that their students' external community has on their teaching practices. Goodwin (1997) articulates this as multicultural or culturally responsive pedagogy. This kind of teaching recognizes the "influence of race and culture in educational processes to address visible racial/ethnic children's ways of knowing, how they access information, and how they make sense of the world" (p. 12).

Sarellana (1997) believes that multicultural education must begin with the teacher becoming more aware of his or her beliefs about culture and community and their relationship to teaching practices. She describes three stages of cultural awareness. Teachers who are "not

aware of differences between the culture of their students and the school", are in a stage of "cultural unawareness" (p.44). Sarellana implicates teachers at this stage who "actively reject students' language and culture, either overtly or covertly". She identifies teachers in the "transition stage" (p.45) as those who "gain insight into their students' cultural backgrounds and languages and enrich their curriculum" with this knowledge. Teachers who are appreciative of cultural differences and consciously incorporate teaching strategies that demonstrate sensitivity and awareness of cultural differences are "culturally aware teachers" (p.45).

I believe that this process of "awareness" must begin with a more thorough self-examination so that preservice teachers may begin to "locate themselves within our culturally diverse society and examine their attitudes towards others" (Melnick & Zeichner, 1997). Novice educators must have the opportunity to rethink, re-imagine, and rework their beliefs about their teaching practices in their particular classrooms, so they can then move to position themselves as agents for change by transforming and constructing curriculum and instruction that is appropriately responsive to issues of race and class. To begin this process, preservice teachers should look closely at their field placement and the complexity of their classroom community. It is my contention that the first step in making meaning of the greater external community in which your students' live, is understanding your personal beliefs

about diversity and recognizing the particular community that exists in your own classroom. As preservice teachers begin to ask themselves about the students in their classroom and the conditions that exist that either support or prohibit their success, they will begin to understand the complexity of diverse classroom environments. This increased understanding and appreciation of the cultures represented within their classroom will illuminate the responsibility that teachers must assume in becoming more aware and responsive in their practice.

A Professional Development School Setting

Working as a supervisor in a Professional Development School program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I work with preservice teachers over three semesters of their formal teacher education. This particular cohort operates alongside the regular teacher education program and because of size limitations is offered as an option for only a small number of preservice teachers who express an interest in working in this kind of collaborative setting throughout their program.

In the application process for the Professional Development Program, candidates share their commitment to teaching in racially and socio-economically diverse settings. Some of participants have aspirations of teaching in urban schools after graduation and all have expressed an interest in engaging in critical conversations about equitable and socially just teaching. During their preservice training, the Professional Development School preservice teachers are placed in two of

about diversity and recognizing the particular community that exists in your own classroom. As preservice teachers begin to ask themselves about the students in their classroom and the conditions that exist that either support or prohibit their success, they will begin to understand the complexity of diverse classroom environments. This increased understanding and appreciation of the cultures represented within their classroom will illuminate the responsibility that teachers must assume in becoming more aware and responsive in their practice.

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four highly diverse schools within the Madison Public School System and attend seminars in the school settings. In these weekly seminars, attempts are made to address the challenges faced by teachers as they work to meet the needs of diverse learners within the existing political and social contexts of schools. These focused discussions and the diverse field experiences support Nieto's (1992) belief that "experiential components" in teacher education programs help prospective teachers develop greater "intercultural competence".

The Madison schools do not provide the same kind of "culturally different" or urban experiences that larger cities like Milwaukee or Chicago inner-city schools might. However, the preservice teachers in the Professional Development School Program are placed in Madison schools where there is a significant number (between forty and sixty percent) of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch (used as an indicator of poverty), are of color, or are not native speakers of English.

In this program, we do not propose to have "the" most effective way to prepare teachers for inner city teaching experiences or for a highly diverse student population. In fact, Ladson-Billings (1994) points out that as the need for culturally relevant pedagogy continues to grow, the task of preparing teachers effectively for a diverse school population remains an unmet challenge. She defines culturally relevant teaching based on three criteria: "1)students must experience academic success; 2)students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and

3)students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (p. 160). The Professional Development School program is committed to this kind of pedagogy and actively seeks out opportunities for preservice teachers to gain experience and understanding of culturally relevant teaching. Preservice teachers need support in examining whether their classroom community currently supports culturally relevant practice. While this examination is initially classroom centered, it is imperative that teachers also recognize and incorporate understanding of their students' external communities.

Most of our preservice teachers are representative of the larger teacher education population. They are primarily white, middle-class females who attended suburban or rural schools in Wisconsin. In most cases, this means that the preservice teachers are placed in schools very different than the schools they themselves attended (Zeichner, 1996). In our attempts to nurture our own community of learners, we have found that many of the preservice teachers have interesting life experiences that have led them to question the existing conditions of schools. I believe that it is important for the cohort to explore these experiences and determine the reasons why preservice teachers' want to teach in different ways and in many cases, very different places. This kind of exploration must "include efforts to understand the tacit assumptions of

practices and to collaborate with practitioners who want to change their practices" (Greeno, 1998, p. 21).

King (1997) has pointed out that in most cases, "teaching candidates usually have not recognized or reflected critically upon the ideological qualities of their knowledge and their own misunderstandings and alienation from the struggle for justice and they have no concrete understanding of or commitment to teaching for change" (p.157). This disruption to one's beliefs is understandably easier when there is at least, a willingness on the part of the preservice teachers to invest in the social reconstructionist orientation of the program. Efforts to challenge assumptions are virtually impossible when preservice teachers are defensive and reluctant to address these complex issues since the "misunderstandings that surround the teaching of 'other people's children' make all the more troubling the disparity between the make-up of the teaching force and the school population" (Delpit, 1988, p. 180). Gomez (1994) noted that "challenging teachers' perspectives on diversity is a long and labor intensive process. Even in programs expressly designed with a coordinated set of experiences to challenge and enhance prospective teachers' notions about teaching those unlike themselves, it is difficult to effect" (p. 326).

The Role of Reflection

Hutchinson and Allen (1997) state that, "one of the goals of teacher education is to develop each preservice teacher into a reflective educator,

one who is a life long learner who perceives every experience as an opportunity for growth, change, and development of understanding" (p. 226). Reflection is identified as the thirteenth Teacher Education Standard at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and all graduates of the program are expected to demonstrate their proficiency and provide evidence of growth and development in reflection.

> *Standard # 13: Is a Reflective Practitioner*
> *Teachers are reflective practitioners who evaluate the effects of their assumptions, choices and actions on others (students, parents, and other professionals in the learning community) and who actively seek out opportunities to grow professionally. They examine assumptions and are enmeshed in ways of thinking and in familial, institutional, and cultural lore and practices. (University of Wisconsin Madison Elementary Education Teaching Standards for Student Teachers, Fall 1999)*

Evidence of reflective practice could and should be found in all aspects of preservice course work, practical field experiences, and within the other fourteen Teacher Education Standards.

Although teacher educators may place an emphasis on encouraging preservice teachers to reflect about their teaching, there is often very little attention spent on determining how teachers reflect, what they are reflecting about, and to what degree their reflections involve exploring the social and institutional contexts in which they work. Reflection is as multidimensional as anything else related to teaching, but one way to describe the concept of reflective teaching involves "making more conscious some of the tacit knowledge that we often do not express. By surfacing these tacit understandings, we can criticize, examine, and improve them" (Liston & Zeichner, 1996, p. 15).

Some teacher educators, like Risko, Roskos and Vukelich (1999) insist that "prospective teachers need explicit guidance in reflection so as to advance their natural tendencies beyond mindless ritual towards a critical stance on the pedagogic understandings and actions" (p. 7). Van Manen (1977) developed a framework that looks for reflection at three different levels and contends that most preservice teachers will likely stay in a place of reflecting only on technical issues of teaching if they are not pushed to think more deeply.

There are countless strategies that teacher educators employ to develop reflective habits in their preservice teachers. Most programs require their students to keep journals and participate in other "reflective" activities, but the term reflection and what it actually looks like is still rarely defined or modeled in any meaningful way. Those that are most successful, "nurture students' confidence in the worth of their ideas while also encouraging them to reflect on and rethink their views" (Wade, 1994, p. 240). "Just as there is a vast untapped potential, yes, genius among the children, there is also a vast untapped potential among the teachers who serve the children...Teachers need their own intellectual and emotional hunger to be fed. They need to experience the joy of collaborative discussion, dialogue, critique, and research" (Hilliard, 1991, p. 32).

Schon (1987) regarded reflection as a solitary process or as a process engaged in with one mentor. Traditionally, teacher educators

have paid little attention to the potential enhancement when teachers choose to reflect and communicate with peers in a collegial setting. In the Professional Development School Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, this collaborative emphasis is at the heart of reflective practice. We believe "cognition is a social product that is achieved through interaction" (Moll, 1990, p. 83), and that individuals only come to understand meaning and behaviors while in the process of collaboration. It seems only natural that teacher education should be the place where this type of inquiry begins and is modeled.

My experience as a university supervisor has been that preservice teachers often seek out opportunities to question their practice and engage in critical dialogue, but need support and guidance to ask critical questions. In a collaborative setting, there can be valuable "negotiation of meaning" (Wenger, 1998) when colleagues engage in mutual dialogue and understanding. "We need one another's ideas for stimulation and we need one another's perspectives to enrich our own" (Joyce & Calhoun, 1995, p. 51).

Preservice teachers will more likely engage in critical dialogue and be challenged to explore these highly personal and sometimes painful issues when they feel safe, respected, and understood by colleagues and supervisors who support them. Duckworth (1997) discusses the guiding practices that she incorporated into her teacher study groups to ensure that the participants felt safe in the setting. Her belief is that for "one's

knowledge to be useful, one must feel free to examine it, to acknowledge one's confusions, and to appreciate one's own ways of seeing, exploring, and of working through to a more satisfactory level" (p.2).

Statement of the Research Questions

**Can action research investigations that are based on questions of classroom practice help to build understanding of one's students' external school communities?*

**Does the participation in action research encourage and support preservice teachers to more critically and rigorously reflect on their practice?*

Action Research as a Strategy to Promote Critical Reflection

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) define action research as "a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social practices as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out" (p. 5).

Action research assumes that significance and meaning lie in the actual situations of teaching and learning. This implies that knowledge about teaching should be determined by what teachers actually do. It seems only logical that "if we value students' learning to participate in practices of inquiry and sense making, we need to arrange learning practices of inquiry and sense making for them to participate in" (Greeno, 1998, p. 14). If learning to teach is in fact a process, then from this perspective, action research could be viewed as a means of learning

to teach and a way of teaching that could eventually become a natural practice. Prioritizing opportunities for preservice teachers to engage in critical inquiry of their own practice that is supported within a collegial setting of peers is imperative to teacher preparation.

This study focuses on the use of action research with preservice teachers as a means to encourage on-going critical reflective practice, particularly as they explore the possibilities and challenges that diversity brings to their classroom community. Miller and Pine (1990) acknowledge the value in a teacher's personal investment to their action research investigation because "when teachers engage in their own classroom based inquiry, they use their own expertise, experience, initiative, and leadership. Their investment offers teachers active participation in the development of meaning and knowledge" (p. 56).

Using Action Research to Develop an Understanding of Community

One of the University of Wisconsin-Madison requirements for the student teaching semester is that the preservice teachers must participate in a community project. For Broesamle and Holm (1997) "community projects increase students' awareness of their community and its problems while enhancing their sense that they are not powerless bystanders to societal events. One of the goals of the UW project is that preservice teachers will "become empowered to act, find resources, and engage others in action" (p. 38). There are no specific guidelines handed

down from the University for this project, which means that individual supervisors interpret this assignment in very different ways. Soon after I began supervising, I realized there might be value in integrating this community project into an action research investigation. I have found that preservice teachers often struggle with questions they have about the effectiveness of certain teaching practices and the impact they have on particular students. These questions are almost always directly connected to issues of "difference". Usually the preservice teacher is unfamiliar with the students' cultural or community background. They find that they are having difficulty in "developing a closer fit between the students' home culture and the school" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 159).

In previous semesters I have introduced the preservice teachers to the concept of action research as a professional development model for practicing teachers. The Madison Public School District actually supports a formal structure of action research as one professional development option for experienced teachers. This often means that preservice teachers are working with cooperating teachers who have engaged in their own action research investigations or are at least familiar with the process. Most of the preservice teachers are impressed with the value that this particular form of research places on teacher-produced knowledge and appreciate that "no conceptual distinction is drawn between that being researched and the process of researching" (Gore & Zeichner, 1991, p. 128). They also admire the fact that "finally

teachers seem to be gaining respect as a profession" (Genor, 1999a). Other preservice teachers point out that "teachers are able to take an active role in finding solutions to the problems in their classrooms" (Genor, 1999a) and recognize the potential for "teachers to become revitalized in their practice" (Genor, 1999a) through their experience with action research.

The second step in introducing this experience with action research, was to change the Community Project's name to "CARI" (Community Action Research Inquiry, appendix). I found that the traditional "community project" brought images of community service to the preservice teachers. While community service can be valuable and I commend those who participate in it, I am not sure that it necessarily impacts the way a teacher interacts with a particular group of students or directly influences their practice. I realized that it was especially important to "construct the action research as a natural extension of their student teaching experience rather than as an additional task. Action research provided a focus and a systematic element to their reflection in order to understand and improve their situation and their practice" (Gore & Zeichner, 1991, p.126). It seemed unlikely that preservice teachers would invest their energy in this potentially empowering process if they failed to make these kind of concrete connections to their own teaching. This kind of empowerment might

imply that teachers actually experience ownership of their individual professional knowledge (Miller & Pine, 1990).

Methodology: Data Collection

To demonstrate the impact of using action research to promote critical reflection, I collected data from multiple sources for two semesters as preservice teachers actively participated in their own investigations. Sources of data included:

*documentation of meetings when action research process was introduced (agendas, readings, journal notes, and written reactions to the seminar presentation)and projects were discussed.

*initial action research questions (journal entries detailing the students' interest in the questions).

*poster sheets (action research questions on top and reactions, feedback, clarifications, questions from peers-when they were asked to respond).

*revised action research questions.

*journal entries with proposed plans of action, time frame of studies, and reasons for revisions.

*hundreds of journal abstracts that refer to their involvement in the action research process.

*tapes (transcriptions) and field notes of sharing sessions at midway points of study (students came prepared to seminars to share their progress, frustrations, etc.)

*interview transcripts of several students involved in the process.

*supervisory journal entries (including informal conversations-post observation conferences, phone discussions, etc.).

*tapes (transcriptions) and field notes of final sharing sessions (informal for practicum).

*tapes (transcriptions) and field notes of student teacher formal presentations.

*feedback cards from peers (each student was asked to respond in written form to the presentations).

*final write-up reports of student teacher's action research investigations.

Analyzing the Action Research Investigations

For the purpose of this paper, I have analyzed the impact that the participation in an action research investigation can have on the critical reflective practice of preservice teachers and their understanding of students' external communities and their multidimensional impact on the classroom community.

When first introducing the CARI project, I encourage the preservice teachers to look back through their journals and identify areas in which they seem to focus their writing. They often concentrate on particular students who intrigue, frustrate, or concern them. For example, one preservice teacher wondered how she should modify her curriculum for those students who were challenged because English was not their native language. Another preservice teacher believed that negative self-esteem and previous failure in math were preventing her students from finding success in a learning environment that was seeking to provide inquiry based instruction.

As the preservice teachers looked more closely at their students and classrooms, they "began looking critically at their situations and to deal constructively with their concerns or discomfort by thinking about them as possible topics for action research" (Gore & Zeichner, 1991, p. 128). The following are examples of emerging action research questions that focus quite specifically on preservice teachers' particular classroom contexts and the issues they face in their teaching:

*How do I draw students into my lessons who seem to have a hard time staying focused and keeping on task?
*What kind of a role should I have in the resolution of classroom conflicts?

*How can I help students develop self-confidence in their reading and writing abilities?

*How does the physical classroom environment of my classroom affect student learning?
*Can whole group lessons allow for progress/success at all ability levels?
*What elements must be taught for students to become more independent learners and thinkers?
*How is the concept of homework understood by students in my classroom?
*How does depression impact the learning of individual students and how can a teacher build in support for students who suffer from depression and low self esteem?

(Genor, 1999e)

As noted in my supervision journal, most of these questions appear to be instrumental in nature and deal more specifically with technically based, classroom management issues (Genor, 1999h). It is interesting to note that the questions utilize the preservice teachers' emerging use of common teaching terms, such as "on task, independent learners, progress, success, etc." The questions themselves provide us with little indication that the preservice teachers have thought more deeply about what it necessarily means to be on task, to learn independently, or that there is some preconceived notion of what it means to be a successful student. In my response and reaction to these emerging classroom questions (in supervisory conversations and within journals), I encourage the preservice teachers to think past their immediate classroom management concerns and to focus more critically on their practice, their specific contextual community, and the concept of culturally relevant teaching. While it is definitely not evident in the

wording of their initial questions, it turned out that most of these inquiries were in fact connected to issues of difference, namely racial, cultural, and second language challenges they faced in their classrooms. It is apparent that some of these preservice teachers begin their field placements in Sarellana's (1997) stage of "cultural unawareness". Still, for some it takes very little support to move into a "transition stage" where they actively seek out information about their students' cultural community and background to incorporate into their practice as a novice teacher.

Early in the semester, each preservice teacher comes prepared to post their emerging questions on large poster paper around our seminar room. We then spend a significant amount of time individually visiting the questions and providing everyone with feedback. Sometimes this feedback asks for further clarification of the issue or a definition of a term that was used in the question. Specific comments from the collaborative group often demonstrate the need for the researcher to narrow their particular question. Others encourage the researcher to make more direct connections with a particular student's culture or language (Genor, 1999f). With this feedback, preservice teachers are compelled to think about how their investigation might directly impact their practice.

Preservice teachers also use seminar time to discuss possible strategies for data collection and they ultimately design a mini-

investigation that is intended to provide insight into their question. Last semester, two preservice teachers had similar investigations. Both were seeking ways to incorporate their students' interests, backgrounds, and natural inquiries into their curriculum. While they were placed in very different classrooms, one in first grade and the other in sixth, they were able to brainstorm strategies that could be incorporated into their daily lessons in an attempt to gather more personal information about their students. They developed surveys and discussed more informal ways to gather this kind of knowledge about their students. These preservice teachers believed that with an increased understanding of their students' backgrounds they could more effectively plan relevant lessons and implement instructional methods that matched their students' experiences, interests, and abilities more directly (Genor, 1999g).

Most often, the action researchers realize that to gain insight into their questions, they will definitely need to learn more about their students. In some cases I have found it necessary to be explicit in my interactions with preservice teachers by pushing them to look for deeper meanings and helping them to relate their questions more directly to the external community of their students (Genor, 1999d). Preservice teachers are encouraged to go beyond their classroom walls, finding information by utilizing school personnel (counselors, nurses, special education instructors) and outside the school community where they can address their issue with parents or community agencies. "Providing

prospective teachers with various kinds of community experiences enables them to better utilize community agencies and resources in the school program, helps them to learn about their students and families, fosters a greater sense of community service among both teachers and students, and generally helps to break down the barriers between schools and communities by creating more community-responsive schools" (Zeichner & Melnick, 1995).

The preservice teachers spend a little over a month actively engaged in their investigations. The weekly seminar with the cohort group provides a collegial audience to share strategies, resources, and an environment to pose more questions. Preservice teachers periodically come prepared to share their progress and bring in artifacts to facilitate these discussions. They are also encouraged to discuss their action research investigations in their journal and in supervisory conferences. Due to the limited time spent in their field settings (three mornings a week for nine weeks) practicum students report their findings briefly and informally during one of our final seminars. Student teachers are able to continue their explorations for a few weeks longer and eventually share a more formal oral presentation. They are also required to write a short reflective paper to describe the action research process and its impact on their classroom practice and educational philosophy. Most of the preservice teachers have also chosen to do document this experience within their professional portfolio.

One preservice teacher described the challenges she faced in her classroom setting that led her to begin asking questions about her teaching:

"Within my classroom, there is a range of learners, with differences emerging in areas of ability, race, language, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Within each classroom, there are walls that separate the students; walls of differences that pervade and surround each student. There are neighborhood walls. Walls of language exist. Gender differences create walls. Walls are built around what kids can do and what they can't do. What can I do as a teacher to break down these walls and how can I as a teacher demonstrate the value in differences?" (Genor, 1999b)

This awareness of difference within her own classroom is indicative of sophisticated reflection. This preservice teacher is taking responsibility for finding ways that she might connect more closely with her students and ways they might also connect with their classmates in collaboration. In the following description of her action research question and investigation, she describes the incorporation of multiple teaching strategies and the opportunities she instigates to actively involve the students in her own inquiry:

"The issue of walls and differences within the classroom led me to pose an action research question about classroom community. I wanted to probe whether there were certain steps that I could take to break down the walls that exist in my classroom...I worked under the assumption that if I were able to build up the community of the classroom, I could then crack the walls of separation...I wanted to design experiences that would lead my students to develop deeper relationships with their peers. I first began by looking at the curriculum and how it could support this way of learning about and from one another. We began to discuss the concept of community and culture openly and honestly. As much as possible, I provided opportunities for students to share their own culture and experiences. One day, students brought in a bag of five items that reflected their personal culture. Ultimately, all of these activities led up to a day away from the classroom setting at a local adventure camp where students participated in cooperative challenges that worked to develop a sense of teamwork and cooperation." (Genor, 1999b)

This student's summary of her action research investigation looks at the implications of her project and the challenges of addressing the

concept of community within her classroom. She discusses her interest in creating an environment that is respectful of differences and seeks to include collaboration in ways that extend beyond the classroom walls. In further study, this preservice teacher might be compelled to investigate whether these systems of community building that she has incorporated into her classroom also exist in other aspects of these students' lives and in the communities where they live:

> *"Does this sense of community that we have created transfer to other contexts in which my students exist? Are these skills, that they now seem to embrace in the school setting, apparent in other contexts and in their relationships outside of school? As I walk down the hall and sit on the bench at recess, I see my students empowered by this sense of community and this appreciation for difference." (Genor, 1999b)*

As she reflects on the experience of participating in action research she has this to say:

> *"I like the idea of having a system that encourages me to reflect on my teaching practices. I definitely think that my focus forced to be more thoughtful and effective in my planning and instruction. I had a purpose to my teaching." (Genor, 1999b)*

This commentary is evidence of one particular student's participation in more rigorous and critically reflective practice. In subsequent supervisory conversations with this individual she shared her motivation and greater competency towards engagement in this kind of reflective inquiry (Genor, 1999h). I have confidence that this experience in action research will inspire her as a novice teacher to look more critically at her practice, explore the complexity of a diverse classroom community, and seek to understand the impact of her students' external school community on her classroom.

Challenges of Action Research

In my original conception of the CARI project, I envisioned that preservice teachers might stay with a particular question throughout their three semester sequence, perhaps choosing to look at it through different lenses or by using different methods of inquiry. This made sense because their "community" would essentially remain constant because of the extended time spent in one particular school. However, it soon became apparent that as they changed classroom placements each semester, their action research also tended to change focus and in many cases shifted completely. I now realize how the classroom setting and the interactions that these preservice teachers have with particular students were integral to the kinds of questions that were raised in their action research. It also demonstrated our continued focus on classroom based questions as a means to study those diverse settings. One semester a preservice teacher might be more challenged by trying to meet the needs of drastically different learning abilities all within their classroom. The next semester he or she might be focused on questions about a specific student's communication style or behavior that is unfamiliar to those the preservice teacher has ever experienced before (Genor, 1999e).

These shifts in focus mean that the action research investigations become semester long projects. I acknowledge the limitations of participating in yet another short-term strategy to promote reflection.

One preservice teacher expressed her concern about the limited nature of the project, "I almost felt like I was short changing the overall experience by not having more time to really explore the process of action research" (Genor, 1999a). Others also expressed their concerns, but also their acceptance, "there are so many things we want to talk about in seminar and it just seems like there is never enough time" (Genor, 1999c) especially "with the other demands that are placed on us in our methods courses. It seems only natural that we will only get a taste of this process" (Genor, 1999c). Still, there were many preservice teachers who were more willing to accept the problematic nature and simply embraced the process. "It gave me the opportunity to really dig deeper into the kinds of questions that I was having about my students" and "I am not sure that I would have realized the value in pursuing my own inquiry had I not experienced this process first hand". Another preservice teacher also commented, "while I still have many more questions than I could possibly ever find answers for, I feel like I have the tools and inclination to engage in this process without necessarily having to have a formal structure" (Genor, 1999c).

In the same light, while there was always initial excitement about action research as a valuable professional development experience for practicing teachers, there was also anxiety on the part of some preservice teachers, especially those early in their sequence. They expressed concerns about their lack of experience. "I'm worried that I won't be able

to come up with questions and concerns or those that will really make a difference in my classroom" and "I think action research will be very difficult for us to do because I do not feel like I even have my own teaching practices" (Genor, 1999a). As a supervisor, it is imperative for me to recognize and support these concerns by nurturing their self-confidence and encouraging growth and development in their teaching abilities.

While some of the action research investigations naturally became more connected to an external concept of community and an understanding of cultural diversity, there were others that seemed to remain more focused on a preservice teacher's specific classroom practice or in the idea of classroom community and what it means to work in a diverse setting. While I always ask preservice teachers to consider the greater cultural implications of their questions, I feel that it is important for them to "pursue issues and gain capabilities in their preferred directions" (p. 125). Because of this, I always supported their "original" question and was careful not to push their investigations in a direction that I may have preferred. Gore and Zeichner (1991) discussed their unwillingness to interfere with their students' inquiries. Their belief in the empowering practice of action research caused them "to refrain from trying to manipulate the students to work on [their] agendas through their action research" (p. 125).

I believe that each of my students came to a greater understanding of their classroom community by participating in this project. In their explorations, they investigated the effects of particular teaching practices on certain students. Many of the preservice teachers were compelled to explore existing school events and programs, local and state agencies, and resources inside and outside the school walls that impact life within their classrooms. Most importantly, they came to appreciate the value in asking questions and creating structures within their reflective practice to gather insight and understanding about their issue in question.

Three Supervisors Engaged in Action Research

Throughout this study of incorporating action research into a preservice teacher preparation program, I was also participating in my own action research investigation with three fellow supervisors. We continue to meet twice a month to support our own self-studies as teacher educators. Given the institutional conditions that structure the work of all educators, university supervisors typically work within circumstances that can isolate them and constrain their opportunities to collaborate. This often prevents supervisors from examining their own practices and challenging their own hidden assumptions. Our meetings provide opportunities for us to address common concerns and share our experiences of working with various strategies to promote critical reflection in preservice teachers. We believe that in these times of

teacher education reform, it is imperative that teacher educators engage in self-studies to assess and investigate how they can provide opportunities for critical reflection in a teacher preparation program. Gore (1991) pointed out that "if we value action research to promote reflective teaching, we will learn from the conduct of our own research and, in so doing, will help students learn from and appreciate such practices" (p. 254). Working closely with two colleagues supported my self-confidence as a supervisor by providing me the opportunity to articulate my supervisory beliefs and educational platform. Often my peers pushed me to think more critically about my practice and raised questions or concerns about the strategies I used with preservice teachers and my own interpretations of their effectiveness. This experience in self-study with the guidance of a supportive peer group has further demonstrated the value of collaborative inquiry.

Conclusion

I appreciate the complexity and ambiguous nature of reflection and look for ways to support the habit that I believe is essential to a social reconstructionist orientation to teaching. Because "inquiry is relational and involves being in relationships with others in many different ways", (Meyer et. al, 1998, p. 148) I am committed to providing collaborative, reflective opportunities for my students and in my own participation within these settings.

Preservice teachers need support in exploring the questions they have that might ultimately make a difference in their students' learning. Action research provides this kind of opportunity. My hope is that this way of thinking and reflecting will become a habitual way of teaching for these preservice teachers and that their increased comfort with this reflective process will encourage them to take classroom based inquiries to another level of understanding. Action research provides preservice teachers with valuable experience in gaining knowledge and respect for the cultural diversity that exists in their classrooms. I hope it will also allow them to explore students' communities outside of the school and the cultural backgrounds they bring with them each day to the classroom. I believe that with experience and practice in this kind of reflective teaching and inquiry, preservice teachers are more likely to develop into teachers who do this naturally and have adopted it into their way of interacting with their students and questions they raise in their practice.

Zeichner points out that while "we must passionately strive for a kind of teacher education system that truly prepares teachers to teach all students to high academic standards, we must be realistic about what can be accomplished within the current structures of teacher education" (1994, pp.7). Obviously, there is no single strategy that will completely transform preservice teachers and adequately prepare them to work with diverse learners. However, in Clair's (1998) analysis of various methods

of professional development, she looks to action research as an effective strategy because "it is authentic and embedded in the reality of school life and participatory, designed and directed with teachers' input" (p. 466).

Engaging in the process of action research over multiple semesters in their preservice preparation encourages reflective habits that will hopefully impact their long-term growth as teachers. Obviously, it is difficult to assess the long lasting impact that this kind of an experience will have on their future teaching practices. I realize that many of our preservice teachers will perhaps work in districts that are unfamiliar with action research as a valuable professional development opportunity. Whether or not our preservice teachers end up working in schools where action research is formally supported, I believe that these experiences with the process, will ultimately be beneficial to them because it is "not so much a matter of doing action research on teaching as it is viewing teaching itself as a form of inquiry or experimentation" (Gore & Zeichner, 1991, p.134).

Appendix:

Community Action Research Inquiry (CARI)

As a preservice teacher in the Professional Development Program, we assume that you are committed to educating all students to high academic standards in our increasingly culturally diverse and unequal society. It might be difficult to document or measure your cultural sensitivity. However, it is this program's philosophy that by providing you with opportunities to be a reflective educator, you will be better prepared to meet this commitment.

You have been journaling since the beginning of your program. Your journal has been a place to ask questions, share frustrations, celebrate successes, and follow your progress as well as that of your students. As you become more familiar with your classroom setting this semester, begin to look for patterns in the kinds of questions/concerns/issues that you address in your journal.

Is there:

-a question that intrigues you?
-something you are really curious about?
-something you would like to change?
-something you would like to learn more about?
-something you think might really make a difference?
-something you would really like to improve about your practice?

Are there students who:

-represent a culture that you know very little about?
-speak a language other than your own?
-live in a community unfamiliar to you?
-seem to display a pattern of behavior that you are unable to understand?
-are pulled from the classroom on a regular basis?
-seem to be falling farther behind on daily assignments?
-lack the basic skills to function successfully in the classroom?

Action Research is a process in which participants examine their own educational practice, systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research. It is research done on your own practice to help you improve what you do. It is gaining more information about a question, reflecting on what you have learned, and using that information to impact your future teaching practices.

Assignment

1. Looking back through your journal, **identify a question** that you would like to pursue in more detail. Think about the different ways you might ask this question so that it relates directly to your teaching. (October 13th)

2. **Design an investigation** that might provide insight into the question you have chosen. This investigation must involve working/observing/interacting directly with a student or group of students over an extended period of time. The exact time commitment will be agreed upon by both you and your supervisor and will depend on the issue that you wish to pursue. This investigation must also involve looking/thinking about teaching beyond your classroom walls. (note: your supervisor will help you deal with logistical issues that you may need to address-i.e. parental consent, transportation, resources, etc).

3. Provide your supervisor with a brief **plan of action**. In a paragraph, state the question that you wish to pursue, the students you will work with, and a short explanation of your investigation. Describe three different ways you will collect information about your question (methods of data collection). Also, explain how you believe this investigation will provide insight into your question. (October 20th)

4. Be prepared to **provide evidence** periodically that you have progressed in your investigation. In our seminar setting we will use this evidence to discuss your questions with your cohort peers. This evidence might be in the form of written reflections responding to questions in your journal or pieces of collected data to share. (November)

For Student Teachers

5. Create a five-minute **oral presentation** for your seminar group. This presentation should inform your peers about the issue you chose to investigate and should attempt to improve everyone's understanding of the issue, including perhaps your own. Feel free to be creative in the way you choose to share your information. Following your presentation encourage a five-minute conversation about your issue with your peers. This will be an opportunity for you to address any questions they might have and they will provide you with written and/or verbal feedback. (Mid December)

6. **After** you have completed your project and presentation:
Write a brief (2-4 pages) **paper**. This paper will be included in your portfolio to formally document the completion of your project and provide you with the opportunity to reflect on the impact that this experience has had on your instructional practices and teaching philosophy.

   Your paper will want to include the following information:

   A. Provide your readers with some background on your experience:
      - -particular question that you chose to pursue and perhaps how and if it changed
      - -reasons why you chose this issue/question
      - -description of the investigation and how you believed it would address the issue
      - -process that you followed to set up this project (logistics)
      - -address the parts of this process that may have impeded or informed your inquiry
      - -activities that you and the students were actively involved in during the inquiry

   B. Focus the majority of your paper on a conversation about:
      - -information that you gained by participating in this investigation
      - -ways you will use this information to inform your teaching practice in the future
      - -possible instructional and behavioral strategies that could be implemented and reasons why they speak directly to your issue
      - -follow up activities or projects that might provide you with more insight

   C. Discuss any insights that you may have gained from the feedback that you received from your peers.

Scoring Rubric for Community Action Research Inquiry (CARI)

For all participants:

Oral Presentation & Evidence Conversations (Verbal/Seminar & Written/Journal)

3 Student successfully communicated an awareness of their question and were able to engage the audience in a conversation about their topic.

2 Student introduced their question and addressed some important issues, but were unable to engage the audience in a conversation about their topic.

1 Student posed their question, but offered no personal insight. This failure to provide any sort of framework made it impossible to have a conversation about their topic.

For Student Teachers:

Paper: Organization of Information

3 Student provided evidence of their ability to synthesize, interpret, explain, and evaluate information to extend meaning. This exemplary understanding demonstrated reflective practice.

2 Student demonstrated their ability to gather information and indicated some selectivity and organizing. However, the student provided little evidence that they were able to synthesize, interpret, explain, or evaluate the information. There were significant gaps in the reflective experience of this student.

1 Student provided very little evidence that they had successfully gathered, selected, or organized information to inform their question. Reflective practice was absent from this presentation of the experience.

Paper: Making the Connection to Teaching

3 Student was able to successfully communicate an in depth awareness of their question and how their investigation built an improved understanding of the issue and its impact on classroom practices.

2 Student was able to communicate their question, but there was little evidence of greater understanding or the impact the issue has on classroom practices.

1 Student had difficulty communicating the question and/or its relevance to teaching.

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